



The Ghosts of Monotheism: Heaven, Fortune, and Universalism in Early Chinese and Greco-Roman Historiography

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Abstract: This essay analyzes the creation of the empires of Rome over the Mediterranean and of the Han dynasty over the Central Plains between the third and the second centuries BCE. It focuses on the historiographical oeuvres of Polybius and Sima Qian, as the two men tried to make sense of the unification of the world as they knew it. The essay does away with the subsequent methodological and conceptual biases introduced by interpreters who approached the material from the vantage point of Abrahamic religions, according to which transcendent personal entities could favor the foundation of unitary political and moral systems. By considering the impact of the different contexts and of the two authors' subjective experiences, the essay tries to ascertain the extent to which Polybius and Sima Qian tended to associate unified rule with the triumph of universal values and the establishment of superior, divine justice.

All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives.—Benedict Anderson[1]

The nation as the subject of History is never able to completely bridge the aporia between the past and the present.—Prasenjit Duara[2]

Any structure is the ingenuous re-proposition of a hidden god; any systemic approach might actually constitute a crypto-theology.—Benedetto Croce[3]

Introduction: Monotheism, Systemic Unities, and Ethnocentrism

Scholars who engage in comparisons are often wary of the ethnocentric biases that lurk behind their endeavors. Seldom do interdisciplinary works historicize the concept of religion, tending instead toward interpretations rooted in monotheistic, Abrahamic terms, as well as classifications of religion as an unproblematically universal category.^[4] In his final attempt at writing a universal religious history, the late Robert Bellah (1927–2013) programmatically adopted Émile Durkheim's (1858–1917) structuralist interpretation: "Religion is a system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred that unite those who adhere to them in a moral community."^[5] For a scholar of the ancient Mediterranean and perhaps even more so for one of early China, this formulation is based on key assumptions clearly derived from Abrahamic traditions, traditions that posit religion as a totalizing experience that defines individual and collective identities in an exclusive way.^[6] Consequently, such assumptions about the "sacred," or the "invisible," tend to privilege the cultural role of well-formalized ideas and beliefs over actual social practices and processes.^[7] These assumptions presuppose the universality of the need to organize behaviors and notions concerning "the extra-human realm" into a coherent and unitary intellectual system. Such conceits interfere with purely historical inquiries, for they reintroduce insidious ethnocentric biases and teleological drives in pursuit of philosophical or systemic coherence.

In the post-9/11 world, the specter of a "clash of civilizations" and the urge to establish the basis for fruitful intercultural dialogues has prompted researchers to look for comprehensive views (i.e., *Weltanschauungen*) that treat civilizations as moral and ideological unities.^[8] Such approaches—especially when the comparison is cultural—tend to treat religion or mankind's relationship with the supernatural as a defining element that explains collective agency. Several contemporary discussions on universalism, secularism, and neoatheism reflect this "hegemony of monotheism" insofar as they conceive of the relationships between religion, identity, and agency in systemic terms.^[9] And such intellectual stances still condition the ways non-Western experiences are conceptualized. Therefore, the study of Asian and ancient Mediterranean cases (particularly those that are pre-Buddhist and pre-Christian) holds promise for emancipating intercultural exchanges from implicit ethnocentrism and promoting a truly inclusive approach.

In the West, the propensity to conceive of religion in terms of systems and exclusive identities owes much to the influence of Greek philosophical and Roman legal traditions. In pre-Christian Rome, for example, the coexistence of different customs and attitudes concerning the sacred was conceivable and accepted within the capital city, as well as throughout Italy and the provinces of the Roman empire.^[10] Things began to change in the fourth century. An official notion of religion based in the Church's monopoly on interpreting scripture, defining orthodoxy, and carrying out rituals was established over the course of many negotiations, conflicts, and countless councils. The concept of religion that resulted from these cultural and political processes would be conceived of as exclusive (in that alternatives would not be

tolerated) as well as capable of explaining all phenomena and regulating all human interactions. It became progressively associated with the moral and political necessity of a unified empire. The Reformation would eventually contest this centralized view, but nonetheless reinforced the relationship between religious affiliations and moral, ethnic, and national identities. This approach is deeply rooted in the history of the Mediterranean and Europe and still broadly adopted in contemporary intercultural discourses.

Since its inception, the comparative study of religions seems to have been particularly prone to the rationalization of meta-historical assumptions of Western origin aimed at recognizing unity. This idea of unity has rarely been conceived of as a result of cultural compromise and abstraction, but rather arrived at either in terms of a common revelation or a universality of psycholinguistic structures. Frontiersmen of the field, such as Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) and Georges Dumézil (1898–1986), trained as philologists and interested in the supposed Indo-European origins of Western civilization, sought evidence of shared psychological structures and attitudes among humans toward the sacred. Their research topics included Asia (in their case India), as it was thought to represent an earlier stage of Western civilization.[11] As for Chinese civilization, it finally became integrated in the European comparative discourse on world religions only after the work of James Legge (1815–1897). By contributing to Max Müller's monumental editorial project on the Sacred Books of the East with his translation of the so-called "Confucian" classics, Legge allowed an international readership to acknowledge China as a civilization with its own corpus of scriptures and foundational mythology.[12] In his enormously influential translations, Legge treated Chinese myths either as imperfect renditions of biblical truths, or as fictionalized, if not simply faulty historical accounts.[13] Such an approach seems consistent with the idea that all non-monotheistic religions represented a degenerate form or misunderstood version of an original revelation.[14]

Although contemporary historians and philologists of ancient China rarely resort to the reduction of Chinese phenomena to foreign conceptions, the almost apologetic tendency to re-elaborate (or rationalize, in Weberian terms) Chinese religious or intellectual traditions in terms of systemic unities still reflects the hegemony of Western formulations.[15] In generalist and comparative works, the assumption of notions of transcendence and religion specific to the Abrahamic traditions is evident in the recent revival of the ahistorical Axial Age theory, elaborated upon by the German philosopher and psychologist, Karl Jaspers (1883–1969). The Axial Age theory posits that all the religions and philosophies of the world would reach maturity in specific ages (such as the period between the sixth and the fourth centuries BCE, for example), as the "simultaneous" and polycentric epiphany of the same revelation.[16] Jaspers suggests that discrete cultural achievements in different circumstances and places would serve the same ideas of progress and civilization. The Axial Age theory—which draws from German idealism, Jungian psychology, and Weberian sociological

analysis—offers a philosophical justification for a kind of universalism typical of the monotheistic traditions.[17] In addition, subscribers of this paradigm take religious experiences into consideration only insofar as they can be analyzed consistently by means of a systemic philosophical approach, one that underplays aspects of religious life that would not contribute to the rational development of the individual within society. Hence, the notion of universalism propounded by such a view no longer represents merely an ethical and political attitude but becomes an epistemological axiom that can seriously hamper a strictly historical approach as well as a truly inclusive intercultural attitude.

This paper takes issue with the still common tendency to reduce the concept of Tian (Heaven) in early China to “the Chinese notion of God,”[18] “supreme authority” or “sky-god,”[19] and to assume that it constantly characterized Chinese “religion” throughout history. It concentrates on the notions of “Heaven” and “Fortune” in Sima Qian’s (?145–86 BCE) Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji 史記 hereafter the Records)[20] and in Polybius’s (200–118 BCE) Histories as case studies on the role of meta-historical factors in accounts of the establishment of the Han and Roman unified rules.

Although the propagandistic or apologetic motives of imperial narratives, as well as the very literary structure of universal histories tend to produce teleological trajectories, the authors as well as the protagonists of these two works did not conceive of a universalistic, super-ethnic religion that propounded the unity of the metaphysical, moral, and empirical realms. Their worldview was not influenced by monotheism or by its conscious rejection. Yet it is interesting to notice that Polybius, a universal historian with a unitary view, was considered closer to Christianity than the majority of other Greek writers.[21] In contrast, Sima Qian’s work has been criticized for its lack of an explicit overarching philosophical conception.[22]

Sima Qian began his historical enterprise almost five centuries after the fall of the Western Zhou (771 BCE), the last dynasty to claim the Mandate of Heaven, and before the new power of the Han could be fully legitimized. Among several themes, the Records notably explores the possible relationship between political unity and cosmic harmony in a world still characterized by regional diversity and center-periphery conflicts. Polybius, a Greek citizen, instead wrote his oeuvre while trying to make sense of the unification of the Mediterranean carried out by the Romans. By placing Fortune at the center of his narrative, he was the first ancient historian to seek a unifying element before the approach of Christian historiography became hegemonic.[23] Also, by influencing Livy, and in turn Machiavelli, Polybius provided European non-confessional historiography with an argument for defining religion as instrumentum regni or “instrumental to power.”

This essay does not take issue with the rich scholarship on Polybius and Sima Qian, but uses its breakthroughs to enrich and complicate contemporary comparative and generalist debates on the possibility of cross-cultural dialogues. It addresses the

traditionally problematic relationship between the study of ancient history and theory by attempting to integrate textual and empirical analyses into contemporary discourses on religion, universality, and identity while preserving the specificity of the historical method. Finally, this article will seek to ascertain the ways in which the authors of both the Records and the Histories, hailing from different personal backgrounds and cultural contexts, explained the unification of the known world by asking the following questions: What role did extra-human factors play in the establishment of universal empires? Were extra-human forces intrinsically moral and working for the success of an ethnically-specific civilization, or were they “impartial” and “universal”? Did either of the two authors conceive of the existence of any universal values that transcended ethnic divides?

I submit that neither Sima Qian nor Polybius believed that empires coincided with the establishment of a superior moral order. They saw political unification in part as the result of amoral chance, the intervention of which they acknowledged in several instances through a gendered discourse on the unpredictability, elusiveness, and complementary nature of male-female interactions.

Universalism in the Records

Sima Qian and Polybius shared the dual privilege of observing and explaining the exceptional convergence of events and personalities that had enabled the establishment of a single hegemonic power over the world as they knew it. Setting them apart from each other are differing ideas regarding the relative position of each one’s own civilization vis-à-vis foreign cultures and sociopolitical traditions. While Greco-Roman historians tended to approach their subjects in comparative terms, in the Central States, the discourse on civilization had traditionally been self-referential.

Around and across the Mediterranean Sea, identities had developed in the awareness of the coexistence of different civilizations that represented not only challenges but also served as examples. Peoples, goods, practices, and ideas traveled through trade, diplomacy, migration, colonization, and warfare from time immemorial.[24] The proximity and the relevance of the “Other,” the foreign, the strange, and the hostile, had been fundamental in the formalization of both group and individual consciousness.[25] It would be impossible, for example, to follow the history of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Israel without considering their composite natures and mutual connections, not forgetting the importance of cultural diffusion, and the violent impact of external forces. If we look closely at classical historiography, we see that it was out of fear and admiration for the Persian Empire that Greek city-states formalized and embraced a pan-Hellenic identity.[26] In turn, the ancient Romans constructed the idea of a distinctive national character against the cultures of Greece and the Greek colonies in southern Italy, as well as the Etruscans and the other peoples of the peninsula.[27] The analytic approach of the historians writing in and about the ancient Mediterranean tended to be comparative both in methodology and in purpose,

since they had to acknowledge the commensurable political and cultural relevance of other past and contemporary ethnic, cultural, and political realities.

In contrast, the very idea of civilization in early imperial China coincided with the peoples and customs of the Central Plains (the area of the lower reaches of the Yellow River). The ancient Chinese believed that their illiterate and savage neighbors could always be “emancipated” through sinicization.[28] Few today would overlook the import of non-autochthonous elements in Chinese culture throughout history, yet the received textual tradition represents the “Other” as an alternative to “Civilization” only in a dialectical and paradoxical way.[29] Although the Records addresses the negative trope of the uncivilized barbarian in critical terms, its relatively unprejudiced treatment of the Other seems more instrumental to Sima Qian’s preoccupation with the employment of competent officials in foreign politics than indicative of a genuine interest in the Other itself, as the civilization of the Central States seemed to have no conceivable alternatives.[30]

Sima Qian, born by the Yellow River, just a few miles north of the Han capital Chang'an, had always been close to the geographic and cultural center of the empire, and spent his life in the shadows of the imperial court.[31] As he recollects in the autobiographical chapter of the Records, members of his family had served as official historians (*shi* 史) ever since the semi-mythical first Chinese dynasty of the Xia (2100–1600 BCE). For centuries, the Sima had faithfully recorded human, natural, and astrological events, as all phenomena were traditionally considered intertwined with the lives of the ancient Chinese and their ruling dynasties. According to tradition, over time, royal power had shifted from the Xia, to the Shang (1600–1046 BCE), and then to the Zhou (1046–256 BCE), who eventually lost political power over the Central Plains in 771 BCE during a “barbaric” invasion that forced them eastward. The ensuing centuries, customarily divided into Spring and Autumn (until 475 BCE) and Warring States (475–221 BCE) periods, saw first the fragmentation of the Zhou realm and the rise of local centers of power, followed by the consolidation of seven major polities that vied for supremacy over the Central Plains. The state of Qin, which under the Zhou had been in charge of guarding the western borders, ultimately prevailed by defeating the powerful southern state of Chu. The Qin reunified China in 221 BCE thanks to their military superiority and iron grip on people and resources. Yet the Qin dynasty was short-lived, as its empire was proverbially ruled through fear, and the ruthless enforcement of taxes, corvées, and punishments, which angered the people and provoked several revolts and competing rebellions. Years of violent conflicts ended when Liu Bang (?256–195 BCE), a commoner from the region of the former state of Chu, defeated his aristocratic rivals and established the Han (206 BCE–220 CE), the dynasty under which Sima Qian was born and raised.

In the centuries of disunity that followed the decline of the Zhou in the eighth century BCE, several professional advisers emerged, offering contemporary leaders different political strategies and cultural models. Among them was Confucius (551–479

BCE), who extolled the Zhou as the ideal dynasty, which—he emphasized—had ruled not by imposing military control or by exploiting a privileged relation with the divine (represented by ghosts and spirits, *gui* 鬼 and *shen* 神, but by virtue of moral example and the secular *li* 禮 (a complex system of ritualized social behaviors that reinforced social distinctions and fostered a harmonious and stable society, from the elites at the top all the way down to the common people).

When the Han wiped away the violent Qin, some political and cultural elites (especially the Classicists, *ru* 儒 [32]) nurtured the hope that the new dynasty would sanction Confucius's views, which could be revived by studying his sayings as well as those works attributed to the Zhou which the Master had allegedly collected, edited, and commented on—the so-called Classics.[33] In addition, under the influence of the regional and cultural traditions of the Warring States (especially of the state of Qi), some believed that the moral rule the Han was expected to reestablish would also correspond with a new cosmic order, as dynastic power was believed to safeguard the interconnection of natural rhythms and the political institutions.

However, Liu Bang and his immediate successors hesitated before legitimizing their supremacy through unambiguous state propaganda, since semi-independent kingdoms and local centers of power continued to challenge the authority of the Han for decades after the dynasty's foundation, compelling the leaders of the new dynasty to respond with measures that, in their ruthlessness, closely resembled those used by the despised Qin.[34] It was only during Emperor Wu's reign that, with successful military campaigns at home and abroad as well as the enforcement of state monopolies, the new centralized state seemed stable and florid enough to allow for its own celebration. From a historiographical point of view, this celebration was undertaken by the court archivists Sima Tan and his son Sima Qian, who embarked in a narrative enterprise, the Records of the Grand Historian (*Shiji* 史記), the first comprehensive account of the history of Chinese civilization, from its semi-mythical origins to Emperor Wu's triumph.[35] But after five centuries of political and cultural disunion—provided that an original unity was anything more than a literary creation—to weave the histories of the Central States into a single narrative was not an obvious task. Complicating matters further was the fact that the ruling lineage of the Han did not originate from the Central Plains, the region associated with the three traditional dynasties of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou, but from the southern state of Chu.

While several individuals and factions (often representative of different local traditions of the Warring States) contended with each other at court, the Classicists (who would eventually prevail) were still far from representing a well-defined school with a generally accepted theoretical and canonical basis. Although Sima Tan and his son had both studied under teachers of different disciplines and traditions, Sima Qian clearly expressed his admiration for Confucius. However, Sima Qian considered the Master's legacy tragically interrupted; no one had yet been born who could read the cosmos and harmonize its rules with society. The present times were too corrupt to

allow for rulership informed by *li* and filial piety; extant historical records about the Zhou were too fragmentary and obscure for their example to be fully comprehended and reproduced.[36]

Furthermore, Sima Tan and Sima Qian's historiographical approach was inevitably conditioned by their problematic relationship with the ruler whose triumph they were expected to celebrate. As I shall argue below, Emperor Wu's political and cultural agenda was peculiar enough that neither of the two historians could have immediately comprehended or approved of it. Interestingly, when conducting the Feng and Shan sacrifices in 110 BCE, the long awaited grandiose state rituals that were supposed to epitomize the new legitimization of the Han, Emperor Wu wanted no historians to witness it. Sima Tan was unexpectedly left at home, and according to the sources, fell ill and died shortly after because of the snub. Sima Qian was excluded from the last, and most important stage of the sacrifice, while the only person who accompanied Emperor Wu, a charioteer, perished a few days later of mysterious maladies.[37]

Finally, Sima Qian's view must have been severely conditioned by the "Li Ling Affair" of 99 BCE. That year the historian tried to defend the conduct of a general who chose to save himself and his remaining troops instead of leading them on a suicide mission against the onslaught of an overwhelming enemy. Emperor Wu became so angry with Sima Qian for the apology that he imposed upon him a cruel choice, death or castration. Although extremely humiliating, the historian chose mutilation, for it would still allow him to perpetuate the glory of his family through his literary enterprise.

It should come as no surprise that Sima Qian did not believe that the unification of China meant the necessary culmination of a "divine" plan or the realization of a just order. The Grand Historian was too aware that the triumph of the Han represented the realization of selfish interests via violence and conspiracy rather than the victory of a superior moralizing will. Through individual and collective biographies, annals, chronological tables, and monographic essays, the 130 chapters of the Records account for multiple subjectivities in a multifaceted narrative that complicates the recognition of seemingly straightforward historical causation. During the numerous travels he carried out in order to verify historical and geographical circumstances, Sima Qian became acquainted with the multifarious cultures and customs of the different areas of China. Unlike his ancient Mediterranean counterparts who could conceive of different (rivaling) civilizations, for Sima Qian the only valuable standard was the one represented by the Central States. But he did not apprehend their civilization in essentialist terms. For the historian, everyone—regardless of cultural and ethnic background—could potentially embrace the superior ethical and social traditions of China. Further, Sima Qian's accounts of the Other seem self-referential in that they are mainly inspired by the didactic purpose of advising the court about pressing situations.

The Records treats the most formidable enemy of the fledgling Han dynasty, the nomadic Xiongnu, as a byproduct of the Central States, for it traces their origins back to the royal family of the Xia dynasty.[38] According to the text, these nomads were related to the same extra-human forces worshipped by the Chinese. Like the Chinese, the Xiongnu sacrificed to Heaven and Earth, as well as ghosts (gui) and spirits (shen), albeit in their own ways.[39] Xiongnu society represented a diametric opposite of the Confucian ideal, for they lacked literacy, agriculture, care for the elderly, propriety (li), and righteousness (yi).[40] However, according to the Records, these nomads could also betray the flaws and disadvantages of a more sophisticated set of social rituals and etiquette. The text informs us that the royal lineage of the Xiongnu, not constrained by the overly elaborate and strict norms of propriety (li), was in fact, fairly stable and durable, as elite men could marry the widows of relatives in violation of basic Chinese incest taboos.[41] Their relationship with the extra-human, what we may call their “religion,” did not have any role in defining their identity.

As for the Otherness of the people of Chu, homeland of the founder of the Han, the Records traces their origins back to the mythical sovereign Zhuan Xu, a nephew of the ancestor to all Chinese people, the pre-dynastic Yellow Emperor. Zhuan Xu certainly did not establish a reign based on the secular social rituals and exemplary filial piety that would become Confucius’s model, for he “followed Heaven by according himself to its rhythms, prescribed norms that complied with spirits and ghosts, [and] transformed the people by controlling the Five Qi.”[42] Since the Warring States period, Chu, in spite of, or because of its relative exoticism, had become an integral part of discourses concerning the cultural traditions of the Central Plains.[43] And unsurprisingly, the Records does not hold—at least directly—that the origins of Liu Bang, founder of the Han, might constitute an obstacle to his claims to leadership over the Central States. After all, political unity was possible even without li. Furthermore, even though the Records does not seem to subscribe to a well-developed cyclical theory of the Five Factors (wuxing 五行), its authors accept the notion that different styles of rule might fit different periods and circumstances.

In the Records, China, albeit characterized by several cultural and political traditions, seems the only conceivable civilization. Neighboring peoples and foes are depicted not in terms of absolute Otherness or diversity, but inclusively as gradual digressions (due to behavior more than birth) from the established norms of the known world, since their genealogical origin is always sought within the cosmos of the Central States. And it should be noted that because of the millenary history of contacts and interdependence between Eastern and Central Asia, no peoples who clashed with the polities of the Central Plains could be considered completely alien.

Universalism in Polybius

For Polybius, who lived under the hegemony of foreign forces, the world had many possible centers, and civilizations, many possible forms. As pointed out by Frank W. Walbank, both Polybius’s life and oeuvre were deeply affected by “the impact of the

outside world upon Greece.”[44] Son of the eminent statesman Lycortas, Polybius was born in 203 BCE in the Arcadian city of Megalopolis, a member of the Achaean League, a confederation of Hellenic poleis whose aim was to protect Greek autonomy, especially against the intrusions of the Macedonian power.[45] The League had to confront first Sparta’s resurgence, and then the rising power of Rome.[46] Under such a threat, many had hoped that the Antigonid King Perseus of Macedon (212–166 BCE), one of the political heirs of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE), could better safeguard Hellenic independence. But the Third Macedonian War (171–168 BCE) against Rome ended with Perseus’s total defeat. After the fatal battle of Pydna in 168, the last Antigonid ruler was deported as a hostage together with his entourage and the members of the Hellenic political groups who had supported him directly or indirectly. Among them was the historian Polybius.[47]

At the time of his exile, Polybius had already spent more than thirty years at the center of the Hellenic political scene as a young and active member of the Achaean League. In the footsteps of his father and elder brother, who had also participated in diplomatic missions to Rome, he seemed destined for an even more illustrious political career. Around the age of twenty, Polybius was chosen to accompany the urn of the beloved leader of the Achaean League, Philopoemen (253–183 BCE), during his funeral; in 170/69 BCE, at thirty—the youngest age of eligibility—Polybius was elected as Military Commander (*hipparchos*) of the Achaean League, and the position of Supreme Commander (*stratēgos*) seemed likely to be his next prestigious appointment.[48]

Yet the historian’s exile in Italy did not mean isolation from the center of political activity. Whereas his fellow countrymen and hostages were usually not allowed in the capital city, Polybius—due either to his influential acquaintances or because the host government wanted to keep an eye on him—was allowed to spend his exile in Rome. Here Polybius was welcomed in the preeminent cultural and political circles of the time. He enjoyed a relative degree of freedom, which allowed him to travel within and outside Italy and to take part in hunting expeditions. Most importantly, Polybius, in the years of his exile, became a tutor and friend of P. Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus (185–129 BCE), the military and political leader who would be forever associated with the siege and destruction of Carthage in 146 BCE (of which the historian was a direct witness) and the subsequent establishment of Rome as the paramount imperial power of the Mediterranean.[49]

After promoting a policy of “cautious Achaean independence in international affairs,” and witnessing the disbanding of the Achaean League with the destruction of Corinth by the Romans in 146 BCE, Polybius became involved in the reconstruction of Greece (he was repatriated in 150 BCE) and in the political mediation between Greece and Rome, which would gain him durable fame and praise among his countrymen.[50]

In terms of allegiance and identification, these events and experiences determined the complexity of Polybius’s historiographical approach. The historian’s analytic

attitude developed within different political and cultural realities, through the long process of composing and publishing the Histories.[51] The “last writer of a free Greece and the historian of its conquest” lived in a period characterized by strong intercultural connections.[52] In writing the Histories for both Roman and Hellenic audiences, Polybius offered a Greek perspective on Rome’s triumphal advance in the Mediterranean.[53] Simultaneously, the historian had to justify for his fellow countrymen the legitimacy of foreign hegemony over the Hellenic world, while also helping them cope with a new administrative reality. The emphasis on contemporary and “pragmatic history,”[54] namely the specific attention to military strategy, politics, and institutional structures, in addition to representing a stylistic and intellectual choice, allowed Polybius to connect ethnicity and history in a more complex way.[55] For the Achaean historian, who represented the voice of the vanquished, cultural and political superiority did not automatically correspond.[56]

It is well known that Polybius recognized Rome’s “mixed” constitution as one of the principal factors in its surge to power.[57] He interpreted the interplay of consuls, senate, and people in Roman politics as the balanced coexistence of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy—forms of government that had already been implemented in the Hellenic world with varying degrees of success.[58] Polybius’s explanation of Rome’s extraordinary rise could not but simultaneously constitute an assessment of the lapse, however momentary, of Greek supremacy.[59] It is not surprising that the historian’s attitude towards the cultural identity of his hosts, as brilliantly pointed out by Craige Champion, seems equivocal.[60] Whether, according to Polybius, the Romans were members of the civilized Hellenic world or barbarians was “historically contingent upon the health of the institutional structures of the polity” and determined by the alternating cycles of “reason” and “unbridled passion.”[61] Institutions and politics could influence the fate of civilizations. Ethnicity (or culture) did not determine the outcome of events in an absolute way. Yet the dramatic shift of the cultural and political axis of the Mediterranean world must have had a very deep impact on Polybius. Roman dominion seemed to overshadow the achievements of the Persian, Spartan, and Macedonian empires, the most formidable the historian had ever observed and studied.[62] The unprecedented convergence of events and peoples of the known world that had determined Rome’s supremacy also made possible, for the first time, the writing of a synoptic and universal history.[63] And, as we shall see, Fortune would have an interesting role in Polybius’s narrative endeavor.

Heaven in the Records

In cross-cultural analyses, the notion of “Heaven” (tian 天) allows the possibility of analyzing Chinese civilization either in terms of uniqueness or comparability. Heaven can epitomize the supposed integration of the natural, political, and moral orders that purportedly characterizes Chinese civilization, or be juxtaposed against the personal Creator God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.[64] In the former case, Heaven (read as “Nature”) still occupies a preeminent position in theoretical models that emphasize

the distinctive “organicistic” nature of Chinese early thought, which also belies a cultural complex towards the systemic bias of Western philosophical traditions. In the latter case, Heaven either explicitly becomes the “Chinese version of the Christian God,”[65] or, under the influence of Mircea Eliade’s theories, its notion is implicitly assumed as the historical manifestation of the psychological archetype of patriarchal authority.[66]

Interestingly enough, as archeological evidence demonstrates, during the first decades of reunification, Heaven was far from representing the unity of Chinese civilization, for it was conceived, depicted, and worshipped in different ways depending on cultural and geographical contexts.[67] It was at the end of the first century BCE that the Han rulers began to legitimize their authority by institutionalizing a view that, in keeping with Confucian prejudices against the direct involvement of society with spirits and ghosts (i.e., popular religion), embraced (or recreated) the moral rule of the Zhou as a model and integrated the notion of the Mandate of Heaven with Warring State traditions (mainly coming from the coastal state of Qi) concerning the Five Phases (wuxing).

According to the theory of the Mandate of Heaven (Tianming 天命), Heaven would legitimize human institutions by conferring the right to rule the Central States upon worthy lineages, while letting undeserving ones lose it.[68] In the earliest texts of the received tradition, the bestowal of the Mandate sanctions the victory of the exemplary Zhou over the declining Shang while representing a shift between ritual and moral justifications of power.[69] Traditionally, the affirmation of Shang authority was associated with the ritual privileges of their ruling elites to communicate with ancestral spirits directly and by immediate control over resources and land; Zhou propaganda, on the other hand, at least according to texts of Confucian tradition, focused on “quasi-feudal” political devolution and a sovereign who represented more a moral paradigm than an active ruler.[70] As idiomatically chanted in the Odes, in a poem extolling the merits of King Wen, the founder of the Zhou: “High Heaven does its business without sound, without smell.”[71] In other words, men cannot influence Heaven (i.e Nature or Fate) by means of sacrifices.

As we have seen above, when the Qin reunified the Central States in 221 BCE, after the Zhou lost political supremacy in 771 BCE following centuries of violent strife, they did not seek to justify their successes on moral grounds, but proverbially relied on threatening others with their military superiority and ruthlessness. Therefore, when the Qin were defeated, many expected the Han to condemn their predecessors’ hubristic rule and show that Heaven, like in the case of the Zhou, was bestowing the Mandate upon a morally worthy lineage. However, Emperor Wu, the first emperor who could embark on expensive state ceremonies, clearly rejected the Zhou model of secular moral imperial legitimization and drew considerably from regional forms of worship that focused on the achievement of immortality—ones that involved communicating with spirits and ghosts directly, and led him to travel extensively

throughout the realm.[72] If we interpret Emperor Wu's itinerant ceremonial activities as an attempt to patrol the periphery while seeking popular support for his program of administrative and economic centralization, it makes perfect sense that the reforms carried out after his death in 87 BCE limited state cults to the capital city and abolished ritualized imperial inspections (xunshou 巡狩).[73] It can be argued that local elites, through the voice of court Classicists, took advantage of Emperor Wu's death to reaffirm their vested interests in devolution against the direct interference of the Son of Heaven, who intended to realize economic centralization. With the inauguration of the imperial cults of Heaven and Earth, respectively located outside the immediate limits of southern and northern Chang'an, the capital was remapped as a symbolic representation of the universe. Now the ruler, by sacrificing to the suburban altars dedicated to Heaven and Earth, could ritually sanction the order between Heaven, Man, and Earth without leaving the center.[74]

The idea that the cosmic, political, and moral realms were perfectly integrated had a fundamental role in the theories associated with Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE), which acquired paramount importance in Ban Gu's (32–92 CE) *History of the Former Han* (*Han shu*), eventually representing the official doctrine of dynastic legitimization until the end of the imperial era. Dong had been a famous student of the historical work attributed to Confucius, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, in particular of the *Gongyang* exegetic tradition, which tended to interpret omens as the manifestation of Heaven's regulatory power on human events. The *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu Fanlu* 春秋繁露, attributed to Dong, explains the traditional doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven in the context of the Five Phases, as legitimate rule would realize the correspondence of dynastic and cosmic cycles.

Although Sima Qian studied under Dong, because of the intellectual and biographical factors mentioned above, the historiographical approach of the *Records* is not consistent with the belief in the mutual influence of Heaven and men (Tian ren xiang guan 天人相關) in the readability of the world through the correspondence of microcosmic and macrocosmic phenomena, or in the Providence-like, regulatory function of Heaven.

In what follows, I show how an analysis of the treatment of Heaven in the *Records* can offer an original perspective on the author's beliefs about the disjunction between morality and success as well as the inadequacy of the traditional literary heritage for the interpretation of present events. In the *Records*, history does not represent the unfolding of a superior design, while the various meanings of Heaven—from fate or chance to a mere astronomical or natural element—reflect the richness of the cultural world described in the *Records*, before the establishment of a unitary view.

First of all, the *Records* mentions the Mandate of Heaven very seldomly. The statement that a given ruler “receives the mandate” (shou ming 受命) does not imply in the text any extra-human investiture, but that his sovereignty was generally

acknowledged and accepted. The Records (especially in the chapters dealing with events that occurred during the Qin and the Han, which were closer to the time of the authors)[75] does not interpret omens and portents as manifestations of a superior design directly connected to Heaven; in fact, in most cases it openly suggests that they were just a fabrication.[76] On the relationship between Heaven and the destiny of imperial houses, the Records is intentionally ambiguous and, in the case of the founder of the Han, Liu Bang, it connects his successes with the controversial (and notoriously vicious) Empress Lü.

The collective chapter on imperial consorts, the “Houses of the External Relatives” (“Waiqi shijia” 外戚家), clearly questions the possibility of understanding or controlling the fates of men (and rulers), while stating that, no matter how skilled rulers may be, their eventual success will also be owed to the support of an exceptional spouse.[77] Given the necessity of producing and grooming a male heir in a patrilineal aristocratic system, conjugal love was definitely the most relevant among the Five Relations (Wu Lun 五倫). Of note is that the Records explains gender relations in terms of complementarity, but does not refer to yin-yang dualism explicitly and systematically as it would become customary after Ban Zhao’s (45-c. 116 CE) Instructions for Women.[78] In fact, the Records introduces Lü’s role in the creation of the empire by emphasizing the impossibility of discerning the interplay of factors contributing to a joyous marriage.[79] Despite the ambiguity of Sima Qian’s treatment of Gaozu’s consort (and the disapproval of later commentators), the Records devotes one of the basic annals to Lü, a woman who ruled on behalf of her son, the weakling Emperor Hui (194–188 BCE).[80] Lü is depicted as shrewd and manipulative, ready to resort to torture and murder while unsuccessfully attempting to replace the Liu ruling lineage with members of her own family. Nevertheless, according to the Records, she played a fundamental role in holding the reins of the fledgling empire in a tumultuous age.[81] Lü accompanied Liu Bang during his struggle for control over the Central States, and most importantly, the Records describes her as deeply aware of the factors in which the fortune of the empire lay, for her practical sense complemented the volatile temper of her husband.

Provided that it is possible to recognize a coherent attitude toward omens and predestination in Records, it connects Fate, Liu Bang, and Lü in an extremely interesting way. Whereas the future empress’s father was the first one to recognize in Liu Bang’s facial features potential for greatness, Lü herself would hear about her family’s predestination from a mysterious wanderer she met while working in the fields with her sons. Oddly enough, the text informs the reader that Liu Bang would reach the scene later, as he was using an outhouse.[82] Years later, when the appearance of a peculiarly shaped group of clouds reinforces the paranoia of the Qin’s first ruler over the imminent rise of a new Son of Heaven, we see that Liu Bang, instead of facing his imperial destiny, immediately looks for a hiding place. The text emphasizes Lü’s practical sense under these circumstances, as she uses the cloud

formations to find out where her husband concealed himself.[83] This aspect of Lü's character is even more evident in the account of Liu Bang's death. The Records makes it clear that the founder of the Han eventually embraced beliefs about his extra-human investiture so wholeheartedly that once ill, he refused any cures, because "the Son of Heaven cannot be cured by human remedies." While her husband lay dying, we see Lü solely concerned with the replacement of Xiao He, the skillful minister and general to whom the Records clearly ascribes the military successes of the Han.[84]

It is evident that the Records suggests that traditional beliefs about dynastic legitimacy could not be applied to the complex circumstances that led to the Han unification. The important role of the cynical Lü provides an implicit mockery of the rhetoric of the Mandate of Heaven, which is even more blatant in the account in Gaozu's biography, in which old Lady Wu, the manager of young Liu Bang's favorite brothel, recognized the portentous image of a dragon, a symbol of imperial power, floating over the intoxicated and unconscious future Son of Heaven.[85]

Through these narrative devices, the Records simply emphasizes that in uncertain times, people from any walk of life are eager to recognize manifestations of a preordained destiny; that the very belief in destiny, along with its propagandistic exploitation, would constitute a fundamental historical factor. Going back to the origin of the events that led to the triumph of the Han, the Records mentions an omen for the first time in the chapter about Chen She, one of the two heads of the levy whose revolt in the southern state of Chu sparked the revolution that would overthrow the Qin in 206 BCE.[86] Famously, in the second month of the second year of the Second Emperor of Qin (209 BCE), Chen She, a humble hired laborer, is appointed, along with Wu Guang, to lead a group of nine hundred men to garrison a village in the north, near present-day Beijing, against possible Xiongnu attacks. As a heavy rain falls, Chen She realizes that they would not reach their destination on time, and would probably face the punishment of decapitation. Aware of their meager chances of survival, Chen She and Wu Guang decided to revolt and at least die for the glory of Chu.[87]

The Second Emperor had infamously taken the throne by killing the legitimate heir, his brother Fu Su. But since no one had seen his corpse, some believed that Fu Su was simply hiding while awaiting an opportunity to assert revenge.[88] Thus, Chen She convinced Wu Guang to stir and lead a rebellion disguised, respectively, as Fusu and the beloved Chu general Xiang Yan, who had bravely fought the Qin as well, before mysteriously vanishing. Upon embarking on their military enterprise, Chen and Wu decided to consult a diviner. The response sounded positive but ended with an ominous note: "You will accomplish all your plans and achieve success. But then, would you seek responses with ghosts?"[89]

At the time the passage was written, everyone knew that Chen and Wu would both perish (and be in the ghosts' numbers) before the establishment of the Han. The Records, in hindsight, is probably satirizing their naïve optimism. According to the text, the two rebels reacted enthusiastically to the divination and felt encouraged to

make up their own omens. Chen and Wu swiftly wrote “Chen shall be a king” on a piece of white silk and stuffed it in the belly of a fish to the astonishment and awe of the soldiers who were going to have it during the common meal.[90] Furthermore, Chen sent Wu to hide behind a shrine in a grove by the camp. When night fell, Wu produced light effects by concealing a torch underneath a basket while imitating the cry of a fox (an animal believed to belong to the realm of spirits), howling: “The great Chu will rise, Chen She will be king!”[91]

This proved to be enough to convince the laborers to rebel, fight, and eventually die at Chen and Wu’s orders. The Records emphasizes Wu Guang’s good relationship with the soldiers—even going so far as to suggest that they would have done anything for him.[92] Charisma and leadership qualities would also characterize the founder of the Han, as according to the Records, regular soldiers easily related to the unsophisticated, sluggish, and frequently inebriated Liu Bang. A close reading of the text shows that Liu Bang succeeded where Chen and Wu had failed, because, in addition to his popularity among commoners, he could also benefit from the support of aristocratic leaders who represented an element of continuity with the elite traditions of the Central States. Yet, the recourse to popular culture, the beliefs about semi-divine leaders, as in Chen and Wu’s case, were fundamental in establishing a connection between Liu Bang and the common people—even though the Records, as I shall show below, would satirize attempts at interpreting allegedly miraculous events in light of Five Phases theories.

Returning to Liu Bang’s biography, after he had already shown the signs of predestination addressed above, we find in the Records an episode that closely resembles the circumstances of Chen She’s revolt. When Liu Bang was still just a village head, he received the order to conduct a group of convicted laborers from his hometown in the south to the site where the First Emperor of Qin was building his mausoleum. Along the way, the laborers began to defect one by one and disappeared in such numbers that Liu Bang feared he might reach his destination alone. Surprisingly, instead of reacting with authority, Liu Bang stopped his march, got drunk, and then decided to return home after releasing all the men under his command.[93]

The action is set to reach the center of the empire and the locations of the fundamental struggle for the unification that would be the main topic of the Records. Yet, Sima Qian describes Liu Bang as merely concerned with his petty habits and his obscure hometown—at the time, not only did he not harbor any revolutionary dreams, but even held the Qin in awe.[94] Thus, a group of about ten men decided to accompany him back home. While crossing the swampy area, a scout rushed back and suggested that they all retreat, as a big snake was blocking the path. Liu Bang, still drunk, boasted of the brave soldiers’ fearlessness, advanced, pulled out his sword, and beheaded the reptile. He continued on his way for a while before falling asleep under the effect of all the alcohol he had consumed. Meanwhile, a man who was lagging behind reached the spot of Liu Bang’s heroics, where he found an old woman weeping.

According to her story, she was grieving for her son, the son of the White Emperor (Baidi 白帝, who, after assuming the semblance of a snake, had just been slaughtered by the son of the Red Emperor (Chidi 紅帝)[95] The man was incredulous. He wished to enquire further to ascertain her sincerity, but she suddenly disappeared. When Liu Bang finally woke up, he was delighted to hear the man's extraordinary account. And it seems that from that day on Liu had his self-confidence dramatically bolstered while his followers looked up at him with increasing awe.[96]

The Records relates the miraculous events that should sanction the extra-human investiture of the Han to the accounts of convicted laborers who must have been grateful for being released from a feared corvée that might have meant death (the men who worked at Qin Shihuang's mausoleum were routinely killed at the end of their duty) and to their magnanimous, sometimes sluggish, and often intoxicated leader. If portents were to manifest Heaven's will about the fate of dynasties, the Records' narrative makes their reliability at least problematic. If there is a superior design concerning the fall of the Qin and the rise of the Han, both Chen She and Liu Bang's goals seem selfish and shortsighted. By contrast, the element that becomes more evident is the text's focus on personalities, behaviors, and interactions.

Thus, if we compare Chen She and Liu Bang's stories, the almost reckless resoluteness of the former contrasts with the heedlessness and indolence of the latter. In many instances, despite his bad judgment or even cowardice, Liu Bang (and the future of the Han dynasty) was saved by the prompt advice and intervention of his aides. According to the Records, Liu Bang lacked two fundamental Confucian qualities: respect for tradition and filial piety. Famously, after his successful march, Liu Bang was ready to destroy the buildings and archives of the old capital city even at the risk of compromising administrative continuity; he did not show special concern that his father was held hostage and, while being chased by his enemies, would have dumped his son and heir from his carriage in order to accelerate his flight.[97]

The Records portrays Liu Bang as scarcely aware of the importance of the historic events for which he played the role of protagonist. He would ask his more articulate officials to explain why he managed to defeat the braver and more competent Xiang Yu. However, even though Liu Bang did not seem to grasp the value of effective propaganda, he left the most sophisticated and shrewd of his followers to connect his rule to glorious ages of the past through literary citations. His famous dialogue with the classicist, Lu Jia, clarifies the Records' take on the creation of the rhetoric about the triumph of the Han. Lu Jia tries repeatedly to persuade the emperor of the value of the classics, but what he obtains is a scornful reply:

"All I possess I have won on horseback!" Said the emperor. "Why should I bother with the Odes and Documents?" "Your Majesty might have won it on horseback, but can you rule it on horseback?" Asked Master Lu. "... Qin entrusted its future solely to punishment and laws, without changing with the times and thus eventually brought about the destruction of its ruling family. If after it had united the world under its rule,

Qin had practiced benevolence and righteousness and modeled its ways upon the sages of antiquity, how would Your Majesty ever have been able to win possession of the empire?" The emperor grew embarrassed and uneasy and finally said to Master Lu, "Try writing something for me on the reasons why Qin lost the empire and I won it, and on the failures of the states of ancient times." [98]

Eventually, Liu Bang would take credit for recognizing and exploiting the talent of his officials, as though letting them save him from his own inconsiderate behaviors and shortsighted decisions was part of his conscious plan:

When it comes to sitting within the tents of command and devising strategies that will assure us victory a thousand miles away, I am no match for Zhang Liang. In ordering the state and caring for the people, in providing rations for the troops and seeing to it that lines of supplies are not cut off, I cannot compare to Xiao He. In leading an army of a million men, achieving success with every battle, and victory with every attack, I cannot come up to Han Xin. These three are all men of extraordinary ability, and it is because I was able to make use of them that I gained possession of the world. [99]

Finally, it is clear that when the Records mentions Heaven and its positive role in determining human affairs, it is merely reporting ideas and beliefs, cultural factors that, in the opinion of its authors, played a fundamental role in shaping historical events. When Sima Qian directly refers to Heaven in his personal remarks, it seems that the ambiguous and even tautological tone of his statements is meant to admonish the readers that historical causes are to be sought beyond grandiose proclamations and official truths. After the narration of the struggles between the Qin emperor and the feudal lords, whom he refused to grant enough land, the fourth Chronological Table (biao 纪 on the states of Qin and Chu reads thus:

Yet from the lanes of the common people there arose the signs of a man of kingly stature whose alliances and military campaigns surpassed those of the three dynasties of the Xia, Shang and Zhou. Qin's earlier prohibitions served only the noble and the wealthy and helped them remove the obstacles they had to face. Therefore [Gaozu] manifested his indignation and became the leader of the world. Why do people say that no one can become a king unless he possesses land? Is such a man not what the literary tradition would consider a "True Sage"? Is this not the work of Heaven? Is this not the work of Heaven? Is not the True Sage the man who is able to receive the mandate and become emperor? [100]

Is the Records stating that Heaven is the power that allowed a commoner to reestablish the privileges of a group of dispossessed landowners? Is the historian referring here to the momentous convergence of exceptional personalities around Liu Bang? Did he prevail because those aristocrats, generals, and politicians whom Sima Qian ultimately credits with Liu's success relied on Liu's charisma and popularity, as they thought that the future Gaozu, being a landless outsider, could not interfere with

their specific interests? Is the text suggesting that a legitimate ruler is just the one who, *ex post facto*, can be acknowledged as having real power?

I believe that the Records' rhetorical and ironic way of referring to Heaven is even more evident in a statement by Li Yiji, "the Mad Scholar," an outspoken wise man of humble origins who would end up being boiled alive. Here Master Li is advising about possible military strategies against Liu Bang's fiercest rival, and advocating the necessity of controlling the granaries.

I heard a saying that "he who knows the 'heaven' of Heaven may make himself a king, but he who has not this knowledge may not. To the king the people are Heaven, whereas to the people food is Heaven."^[101]

According to this passage, Heaven refers to the specific knowledge required to get the best out of specific circumstances or social conditions. It does not present any extra-human connotation. It is an empty word that can be used to glorify one's contingent aims. It is connected to adaptability and receptiveness rather than to constants and absolutes. And in this respect, Liu Bang acted, almost unconsciously, as an empty center around which different interests and agencies could converge.

Polybius and Fortune between the Hellenic World and Rome

As for the role of Fortune (Τύχη, Τύχη in Greek, Fortuna in Latin) in the Greco-Roman world, it epitomized neither the extra-human investiture of ruling lineages nor the organic connection of the human and natural realms. Yet, as pointed out by J. J. Pollitt, in the social and political uncertainty that characterized the Hellenistic period, Fortune positively turned into an obsession.^[102] Customarily personified as a female deity, Tyche was often chosen as the patron of newly founded colonies, as their future could not be entrusted to a pre-existent cultic tradition.^[103] Between the rise of the Macedonian empire and the consolidation of Rome's power over the Mediterranean, the known world seemed to be undergoing continuous and unforeseeable transformations.^[104] Whether life was subject to unpredictable chance, as the Epicureans held, or ruled by unchangeable destiny, as believed by the Stoics, Fortune could be invoked to favor the precarious existence of individuals or communities throughout the Mediterranean and the ancient Middle East.^[105]

According to the literary and legendary tradition, it was the sixth king Servius Tullius (578–535 BCE) who introduced to Rome the cult of Fortune by building on the Capitoline the temples of Fortuna Primigenia and of Fortuna Obsequens.^[106] Either the son of a slave, or the heir of an enemy chief killed by the Romans, Servius was raised at court among the servants while surrounded by signs of supernatural predestination. Queen Tanaquil, the wife of Lucius Tarquinius Priscus (616–579 BCE), the first Etruscan ruler of Rome, perceived her lineage as extremely vulnerable. She arranged for Servius to marry her daughter as she hoped that he would be the savior of her husband's dynasty.^[107]

Thus, upon the violent death of her husband Tarquinius Priscus, Tanaquil solicited Servius to take over the throne. In his case, as he showed clear signs of an extra-human

investiture, lineage should not count. She admonished Servius that in accomplishing his royal mission, he should consider who he was and not whence he was born.[108] Servius would reign for forty-four years until his violent death in 535 BCE. His murderer was his son-in-law, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, Tarquinius Priscus's son, as well as the seventh, and last king of Rome. His proverbially violent and corrupt reign led to the revolt of 509 BCE and to the establishment of the Republic.

Servius Tullius's relationship with Fortune has been connected to the "anomaly" of his kingship, which he achieved despite his non-Roman and probably non-aristocratic origins and also owing to the influence and scheming of a foreign woman.[109] In the words of Plutarch (46–120 CE), Fortune epitomizes the exceptional character of Servius's reign:

This was a token of his birth from fire and an excellent sign pointing to his unexpected accession to the kingship, which he gained after the death of Tarquinius, with the zealous assistance of Tanaquil. Inasmuch as he of all kings is thought to have been naturally the least suited to monarchy and the least desirous of it, he who was minded to resign the kingship, but was prevented from doing so; for it appears that Tanaquil on her death-bed made him swear that he would remain in power and would ever set before him the ancestral Roman form of government. Thus to Fortune wholly belongs the kingship of Servius, which he received contrary to his expectations and retained against his will.[110]

The role that Fortune plays in Polybius's histories does not seem to coincide with the fulfillment of the author's hopes and expectations. Unlike Christian Providence, it does not constitute the manifestation in history of an unambiguous supernatural plan or the victory of rightful forces. In the Fortune of the Histories, the historiographical and the moral levels are only connected to the extent to which Tyche's unexpected turns test men's wills and skills, just as Rome's triumphs must have challenged the Hellenic pride of Polybius. As clearly stated in the proem of the Histories, Fortune represents the factor that allows events to converge towards one end. Unlike the Records' treatment of Heaven, Polybius programmatically sets Tyche at the center of the theoretical model that should inform his Histories:

For what gives my work its peculiar quality, and what is most remarkable in the present age is this. Fortune has guided almost all the affairs of the world in one direction and has forced them to incline towards one and the same end; a historian should likewise bring before his readers under one view the operations by which she has accomplished her general purpose. Indeed it was chiefly this that invited and encouraged me to undertake my task; and secondarily the fact that none of my contemporaries have undertaken to write a general history, in which case I should have been much less eager to take this in hand.[111]

It is in the universality of his approach, Polybius claims, that his oeuvre is superior to previous historiographical enterprises.[112] Other authors such as Ephorus and Herodotus had already included remote lands and civilizations in their narrations, but

the unprecedented scope of Rome's conquests made it possible to entwine the unitary, teleological narrative that would characterize the Histories as a groundbreaking work:

Now up to this time the word's history had been, so to speak, a series of disconnected transactions, as widely separated in their origin and results as in their localities. But from this time forth History becomes a connected whole: the affairs of Italy and Libya are involved with those of Asia and Greece, and the tendency of all is to unity. This is why I have fixed upon this era as the starting-point of my work.[113]

It is to this unitary end, as Momigliano has noted, that Polybius's persistent popularity up until the modern age is due.[114] Although Polybius did not share Herodotus's narrative talent and richness or Thucydides's analytical rigor, critics could still praise the quasi-Christian universality of the Histories.[115] But unlike Providence, Fortune in Polybius does not embody the moralizing will of a conscious deity. The only instance in which the Greek historian qualifies Fortune's agency in determining Rome's success as a non-arbitrary, quasi-ethical act is in reference to the work *On Fortune* (*Peri Tyches*) by the Aristotelian philosopher Demetrius of Phalerum (c. 350–280 BCE).[116] Just as Demetrius was able to foresee Tyche punishing the hubristic Persians at the hand of the Macedonians, so too does Polybius acknowledge the punishment of hubris in the defeat of Perseus at Pydna by the Romans in 168 BCE. The initial fault lay in the scheme devised in 203 BCE by Perseus's father Philip V of Macedon together with Antiochus III of Syria to attack and divide the kingdom of the infant Ptolemy V of Egypt.[117]

Polybius considered Fortune's direct moralizing function only occasionally and hardly as an element of a conscious plan. Its main role consisted in testing human behavior and in exemplifying the didactic purpose of history writing:

All historians . . . have impressed on us that the soundest education and training for a life of active politics is the study of History, and the surest and indeed the only method of learning how to bear bravely the vicissitudes of Fortune.”[118]

Despite the theoretical statements that open the Histories, scholars deemed Polybius's connection of Fortune and empirical facts as one of the most problematic and inconstant features of his writing. According to Walbank, both linguistic ambiguity and philosophical naiveté characterize Polybius's narrative recourse to Fortune. As the British scholar notes, in the Histories, the word *tyche* is at times employed loosely as a tense of the verb *τυγχάνω*, “to happen.” This usage is consistent with the mention of Tyche in casual conversations during Polybius's times, when it referred to agents considered completely outside human control, or was simply uttered as an interjection—as well as “Heaven,” or “God” in contemporary speech[119]

As for Polybius's philosophical inconsistency, in Walbank's opinion, the Greek historian often mentioned Tyche in order to compensate for his unsophisticated application of the principle of causality in the Histories.[120] Whenever Polybius could not account adequately for the “interactions of events and the dynamic and dialectical character of almost any train of causation,” Fortune would intervene almost as a *deus*

ex machina of the Greek tragic literary tradition.[121] In other instances, Tyche coincided with the unpredictability of meteorological and natural forces. As Polybius states in one of the surviving fragments of Book 36 (which deals with the Macedonian Wars, 215–148 BCE):

In finding fault with those who ascribe public events and incidents to Fate and Chance, I now wish to state my opinion on this subject as far as it is admissible to do so in a strictly historical work. Now indeed as regard to things the causes of which it is impossible or difficult for a mere man to understand, we may perhaps be justified in getting out of the difficulty by setting them down to the action of a god or of chance, I mean such things as exceptionally heavy and continuous rain or snow, or on the other hand the destruction of crops by severe drought or frost, or a persistent outbreak of plague or other similar things of which it is not easy to detect the cause. So in regard to such matters we naturally bow to public opinion, as we cannot make out why they happen, and attempting by prayer and sacrifice to appease the heavenly powers, we send to ask the gods what we must do and say, to set things right and cause the evil that afflicts us to cease. But as for matters the efficient and final cause of which it is possible to discover we should not, I think, put them down to divine action.[122]

The last sentences of this passage clarify Polybius's concern with direct divine intervention, which he strives to exclude from the explanation of causal connections. In the narration of Hannibal's heroic march through the Alps, for example, he chastises the bad habits of previous authors who embellished the simple history of facts by mentioning the intervention of supernatural forces.[123] However, Polybius acknowledges the value of religious beliefs in restraining the behavior of Rome's masses. In his opinion, the political exploitation of the sacred and of people's irrational fears makes Rome superior to its contemporary rivals:

But the most important difference for the better which the Roman commonwealth appears to me to display is in their religious beliefs. For I conceive that what in other nations is looked upon as a reproach, I mean a scrupulous fear of the gods, is the very thing which keeps the Roman commonwealth together. To such an extraordinary height is this carried among them, both in private and public business, that nothing could exceed it. Many people might think this unaccountable; but in my opinion their object is to use it as a check upon the common people. If it were possible to form a state wholly of philosophers, such a custom would perhaps be unnecessary. But seeing that every multitude is fickle, and full of lawless desires, unreasoning anger, and violent passion, the only resource is to keep them in check by mysterious terrors and scenic effects of this sort. Wherefore, to my mind, the ancients were not acting without purpose or at random, when they brought in among the vulgar those opinions about the gods, and the belief in the punishments in Hades: much rather do I think that men nowadays are acting rashly and foolishly in rejecting them.[124]

And it is perhaps Polybius's view of religion as *instrumentum regni* that, through Livy (59 BCE–17 CE), would inspire Niccolò Machiavelli's (1469–1527) influential analysis of the political use of religion throughout Western history.[125]

Conclusions

Polybius's seemingly contradictory treatment of Fortune clearly stems from his complex relationship with the rise of Rome, which he had to accept and explain despite his possibly mismatched emotional attachments. The traditional association of Tyche in the ancient Mediterranean world with new political realities provided Polybius with an evocative unifying element that could resemble a conventional god. Simultaneously it constituted an intermediate stage towards a rationalistic refutation of the role of the divine in history. Fortune, according to Polybius, acted to a certain extent as a traditional force in that it seemed to punish and reward specific ruling lineages by following a hereditary principle. Simultaneously, as the fates of different civilizations and polities were coming together in a new world, in the *Histories*, Fortune replaced the rivaling orders represented by the myriad of Mediterranean gods, even though it could not embody specific universal values yet.

The *Records* instead challenges traditional beliefs and expectations about the unity of the universe and the correspondence of the political and moral orders by unraveling the complexity of human factors and their interactions. For these reasons, while Polybius's discourse on Fortune engages in comparative, cross-cultural analyses, the very notion of Heaven in the *Records* brings into question the importance and readability of precedents, and the continuity of the civilization of the Central States between past and present. Heaven and Fortune are both associated with the possibility of change, the unpredictable, and the mysterious. But while Tyche's female connotation characterizes fate as fickle and ultimately unreliable, in the *Records*, even the traits of elusiveness associated with Heaven, are in a way part of the shared tradition, neither external, nor foreign.

Both the *Histories* and the *Records* stress the function of beliefs concerning the divine in shaping the fate of civilizations. However, whereas the institutionalization of irrational fears, as Polybius remarks, would reinforce the identity and cohesion of Roman society against external threats, the multifarious world of popular religion depicted in the *Records* would have no echo in the establishment of the official dynastic doctrine at the end of the Western Han, as references to an active relationship with the extra-human realm would famously disappear from official discourses on statecraft and morality until the end of the nineteenth century.[126] Heaven, which would be at the center of theories about the interconnection of the natural and human realms, is treated in the *Records* as an obsolete linguistic residue, as the text shows the inadequacy of traditional knowledge in understanding the present.

Ultimately, neither Polybius nor the authors of the *Records* believed that political unification necessarily coincided with the establishment of superior justice or, in other words, with a kind of order they might have actually welcomed. Their historical

sensibility did not lead them to expect that the world must make sense as a whole. For them, extra-human forces—to the extent to which their intervention could be proven—were not clearly acting in accordance with precise design that entailed the manifestation of universal, super-ethnic values. In those times and circumstances, the Records and Polybius did not conceive the extra-human realm, “the divine,” as intrinsically fair, coherent, or as One.

More generally, this essay demonstrates the necessity of historicizing the very notion of religion as well as the relationship between what is perceived as sacred (i.e., unchangeable, and beyond historical contingency) and the foundation of shared morals and identities. In other words, it invites scholars in all fields and areas to question the applicability of paradigmatic notions regarding religion deriving from the Abrahamic traditions to different historical and cultural contexts, as only the programmatic awareness and deconstruction of possible ethnocentric biases can establish solid grounds for fruitful cross-cultural dialogues.

Notes

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983), 204. ¹

Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 29. ²

Cited in and translated from Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, vol. 10 (Torino: Einaudi, 1975), 1225–26. ³

Among the few systematic historicizations of the concept of religion are Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 15–50; and Brent Nongbri’s *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013). It is also noteworthy that the very notion of religion, as well as the term *zongjiao* (in turn a Japanese translation of the English “religion”), was imported to China from Japan in the wake of the Chinese defeat of the Sino Japanese war (1894–1895), as the thinkers of the Hundred Days’ Reform movement believed that the formalization and enforcement of a “state religion” would favor and accelerate the process of nation building by fostering ideological cohesion. See Vincent Goossaert, “1898: The Beginning of the End for Chinese Religion?,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 65(2) (May 2006): 320–24; Jason Ananda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). On the history of concept of “world religions,” see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). For the post-Han period, see the masterful analysis of approaches to the study of Chinese religions in Robert Ford Campany, “On the Very Idea of Religions (In the Modern West and in Early Medieval China),” *History of Religions* 42(4) (May 2003): 287–319. ⁴

Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 1; Bellah paraphrases a

definition in Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 44. Durkheim's influence has been extremely relevant in Chinese studies due to the work of his student Marcel Granet (1884–1940). ¹⁴

Famously, the first attested connection between rituals and identity is in Herodotus (*Histories* VIII, 144). In the context of a speech about the impiety of the Persians, defined Greek identity in these terms: "kinship of all Greeks in blood and speech, and the shrines of gods and the sacrifices that we have in common, and the likeness of our way of life." On the issue concerning the relationship between the "incomparable" model represented by Christianity and other ancient religions, see Jonathan Z. Smith, "On Comparison," in *Roman Religion*, ed. Clifford Ando (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 23–38. As for China, see Jordan Paper, *The Spirits are Drunk: Comparative Approaches to Chinese Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); and, for a philosophical approach, David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Anticipating China: Thinking Through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), xiii–xxiv. ¹⁵

By "social practices or processes," I refer to a range of formulations, from Antonio Gramsci's elaboration of the Marxist concept of *Praxisto* Hannah Arendt's *Vita Activa*. For Gramsci, in addition to the passage cited above (note 3), see Walter Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci's Political and Cultural Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). For the concept of *Vita Activa*, see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 7–21, 248–326. ¹⁶

For example, see Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003); Charles Taylor, "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism," in Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornel West, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 34–59. Also see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). For a very popular "universalistic" reading of world monotheistic religions, see Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Random House, 1993). On the role of religion in today's political and ideological conflicts, see Reza Aslan, *How to Win a Cosmic War: God, Globalization, and the End of the War on Terror* (New York: Random House, 2009). On a meta-historical concept of religion as vehicle of possible meta-cultural encounters, also see Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Max L. Stackhouse and Don S. Browning, eds., *God and Globalization* (New York: T&T Clark, 2003), 4 vols. ¹⁷

On New Atheism, see Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2005); and Michel Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2011). ¹⁸

See Clifford Ando, *The Matter of the Gods: Religion and the Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 43–58. ¹⁴

In certain cases, seeking Indian antecedents of basic Western religious ideas served the purpose of belittling or denying the import of the Jewish contribution; see Douglas T. McGetchin, *Indology, Indomania, and Orientalism: Ancient India's Rebirth in Modern Germany* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009). ¹⁵

Norman J. Girardot, *The Victorian Translation of China: James Legge's Oriental Pilgrimage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). ¹⁶

Anne Birrell, "James Legge and the Chinese Mythological Tradition," *History of Religions* 38(4) (May 1999): 331–53. Birrell holds that Legge (a Scottish non-conformist Christian minister) did not take into account contemporary theories on the study of ancient mythology, probably because of his confessional attitude and his isolation from mainstream intellectual life (*ibid.*, 332). For an exhaustive overview of the history of the field, see Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 1–22. ¹⁷

These ideas would be formalized in the so-called Urmonotheismus (or Primeval Monotheism), a theory developed by Andrew Lang (1844–1912) and Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954). See Wilhelm Smith, *The Origin and Growth of Religion: Facts and Theories* (London: Methue, 1931); Ernest Brandewie, *Wilhelm Schmidt and the Origin of the Idea of God* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983). Schmidt's interpretation of monotheism as the manifestation of a priori meta-historical truth was refuted in Raffaele Pettazzoni, "Das Ende des Urmonotheismus," *Numen* 5 (1958): 161–63. On primeval monotheism, also see Dario Sabbatucci, *La prospettiva storico-religiosa: fede, religione e cultura* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1990), 125–40. ¹⁸

And even materialistic, Marxist, or post-Marxist analyses (especially those still prevalent in the People's Republic of China) are after all rooted in non-metaphysical interpretations of Hegel's teleological philosophy of history. ¹⁹

Karl Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1951), 98. See also Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1953); Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction under the Aspect of the Breakthrough toward Postconventional Thinking* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993). ²⁰

According to Mircea Eliade's (1907–1986) approach, in turn influenced by K. G. Jung's (1875–1961), the yearning for the divine would represent an a priori psychological modality; see Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987); *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts* (New York: Crossroad, 1985); and *A History of Religious Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). ²¹

Georg G. Iggers and Q. Edward Wang, *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (Harlow: Pearson, 2008), 48. On the Jesuits' attempts to find a Chinese notion or term that could correspond to that of a Christian god, see Liam Matthew

Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579–1724* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007), 85–91. ¹⁴

The prominent historian of Chinese philosophy Angus Graham identified the Zhou as the axial “time of awakening” for China, when “[t]he Chou identified their supreme authority T’ien (Heaven), a sky-god hardly distinguished from the sky itself, with Ti the high god of the Shang.” See Angus C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao, Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1989), 1. ¹⁵

The issues regarding the authorship of the *Shiji* are extremely complex. The text was compiled, written, and edited by Sima Qian and his father Tan and eventually underwent several additions and interpolations. Esther Sunkyung Klein, in her recent “The History of a Historian: Perspectives on the Authorial Roles of Sima Qian” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2010), has contextualized the different readings of the *Shiji* throughout the centuries by focusing on the ways cultural expectations modified its reception. Consistent with such an approach, Klein has aptly overcome issues about the *Shiji*’s authorship by focusing on the intellectual impact of the text in different periods and engaging with the notion of “author-function” (in turn borrowed from Michel Foucault). In substantial agreement with such an interpretation, in the present essay, I use interchangeably “Sima Qian” and “Records” only for narrative purposes. ¹⁶

See Arnaldo Momigliano, “The Herodotean and Thucydidean Tradition,” in *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 29, 50. ¹⁷

Xu Fuguan, *Liang Han sixiang shi*, vol. 3 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1980), 195–97. ¹⁸

On the relationship between Fortune (Tychê) in Polybius and Josephus (37–100 CE) as a divine unifying force, see Eric Gruen, “Polybius and Josephus on Rome,” in *Polybius & His World: Essays in Memory of F. W. Walbank*, ed. Bruce Gibson and Thomas Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 257–58. ¹⁹

See Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (London: Blackwell, 2000). ²⁰

On the discourse on the Other as a foil for the formalization of a given cultural identity, see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979); James Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought: Geography, Exploration, and Fiction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992); and George Fredrickson, *The Comparative Imagination: On the History of Racism, Nationalism, and Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). For a classic formulation of ethnicity in anthropological terms, see Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown Series in Anthropology, 1969). ²¹

Herodotus (*Histories* VIII, 144), in the context of a speech about the impiety of the Persians, famously defined Greek identity in these terms: “kinship of all Greeks in blood and speech, and the shrines of gods and the sacrifices that we have in common, and the likeness of our way of life.” For a new analysis of Herodotus’s complex attitude towards the Persians, see Erich S. Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 21–39; and François Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). On the theme and debates on Greek identities, see F. W. Walbank, “Hellenes and Achaeans: ‘Greek Nationality’ Revisited,” in *Further Studies in the Ancient Greek Polis*, ed. Pernille Flensted-Jensen (Stuttgart: Historia Einzelschriften, 2000), 18; Paul Cartledge, “Herodotus and ‘the Other’: A Meditation on Empire,” *EMC/CV* 9 (1990): 27–40; “We Are All Greeks?” *Ancient (especially Herodotean) and Modern Contestations of Hellenism*, *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 40(1) (December 1995): 75–82. On the cultural context of Greek historiography, see also Arnaldo Momigliano, “The Herodotean and Thucydidean Tradition,” in *The Classical Foundation of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 29–53; also, by the same author, *Alien Wisdom: The Limit of Hellenization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). ¹⁴

Ray Laurence, “Territory, Ethnonyms and Geography: The Construction of Identity in Roman Italy,” in *Cultural Identity in the Roman Empire*, ed. Ray Laurence and Joanne Berry (London: Routledge, 1998), 64–78. On the complex relationship of Roman intellectual with Greek culture, see Erich S. Gruen, *Culture and National Identity in Republican Rome* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992); Fabrizio Fabbrini, *Maecenas. Il collezionismo nel mondo romano dall’età degli Scipioni a Cicerone* (Arezzo: Istituto di Storia Antica, 2001). ¹⁵

On a comparative approach to the issues of the other and identity, see Mu-chou Poo, *Enemies of Civilization: Attitudes toward Foreigners in Ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005). ¹⁶

Ibid., 154–59. As an example of Chinese nationalistic attitude towards the Other, Poo cites Qian Mu, *Guoshi dagang* (Taipei: Shangwu, 1970). On the creation of cultural borders in Chinese historiography, see Wang Mingke, *Huaxia bianyuan: lishi jiyi yu zuqun rentong* (Beijing: Shehui kexue chubanshe, 2006). ¹⁷

Tamara Chin provides a compelling analysis of Sima Qian’s attitude towards the Xiongnu vis-à-vis later historical works such as the *Han Shu* and the *Hou Han Shu*; see her “Defamiliarizing the Foreigner: Sima Qian’s Ethnography and Han-Xiongnu Marriage Diplomacy,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 70(2) (December 2010): 320. Chin’s thesis is the basis for my analysis of the theme of ethnicity in Sima Qian. See also Zhang Dake, “Sima Qian de minzu yitong sixiang,” in *Shiji yanju* (Beijing: Shangwu, 2011), 438–53; and Hyun Jin Kim, *Ethnicity and Foreigners in Ancient Greece and China* (London: Duckworth, 2009). See Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China*

and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Sophia-Karin Psarras, "Han and Xiongnu: A Reexamination of Cultural and Political Relations," *Monumenta Serica* 51 (2003): 55–236. ¹⁴

For biographical information on Sima Qian and his father, see chapter 130 of the Records (Shiji, hereafter SJ), in Sima Qian, *Shiji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 3285–3322; and Zhang Dake, *Sima Qian pingchuan* (Nanjing: Nanjing Daxue, 1994). ¹⁵

See Nicolas Zufferey, "The Ru Under Emperor Wu's Rule," in *To The Origins of Confucianism: The Ru in Pre-Qin Times and During the Early Han Dynasty* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), 295–357; Gu Jiegang, *Qin Han de fangshi yu rusheng* (Shanghai: Qunlian, 1955); Marianne Bujard, "Le 'Traité des Sacrifices' du Hanshu et la mise en place de la religion d'État des Han," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 84 (1997): 111–27; Nagai Mizuhito, "Zenkan Butei ki no Taizan Mindō kensetsu ni gan suru ichi kosetsu," *Tōyō no shisō to shukyō* 20 (2003): 98–110. ¹⁶

See Michael Nylan, *The Five "Confucian" Classics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001). ¹⁷

Michael Loewe, "The Authority of the Emperors of Ch'in and Han," in *Divination, Mythology, and Monarchy in Han China* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1994), 85–112. ¹⁸

Chosen from the extremely rich scholarship on the topic, see Zhang Dake, *Shiji yanju*; Zhao Shengqun, 'Shiji' wenxianxue congiao (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji, 2000); Grant Hardy, *Worlds of Bronze and Bamboo: Sima Qian's Conquest of History* (New York: Columbia University Press: 1999); Michael Nylan, "Sima Qian: A True Historian?," *Early China* 23–24 (1998–1999): 203–46; Stephen W. Durrant, *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995); and Wai-yee Li, "The Idea of Authority in the Shih Chi (Records of the Historian)," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 54(2) (December 1994): 345–405; and Li Changzhi, *Sima Qian zhi renge yu fengge* (Taipei: Liren shuju, 1949). ¹⁹

Michael Puett has analyzed discontinuity in the Records in anthropological terms in his groundbreaking *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002). Many scholars explain Sima Qian's pessimism in light of his castration that followed the Li Ling incident, and on the disputed letter to Re An (HS 62, 2725–38), which some consider a work of literary impersonation. On historiographical trends in early imperial China, see On-cho Ng and Q. Edward Wang, *Mirroring the Past: The Writing and Use of History in Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 1–79. On debates about the relationship between Chinese literary heritage and the functionality of historiography, see Conrad Schirokauer, "Chu Hsi's Sense of History," in *Ordering the World: Approaches to State and Society in Sung Dynasty China*, ed. R. Hymes and C. Schirokauer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 193–220. ²⁰

SJ 28, 1398. ²¹

SJ 110, 2879. ¹⁴

SJ 110, 2892. The Records associates the Xiongnu with the constellation of the Western Palace and with the Pleiades—the Xiongnu were ultimately part of the same universe as the Central States; see SJ 27, 1305. ¹⁵

SJ 110, 2879. ¹⁶

SJ 110, 2898. ¹⁷

SJ 1, 11; SJ 40, 1659. ¹⁸

See Gopal Sukhu, “Monkeys, Shamans, Emperors, and Poets: The Chuci and Images of Chu during the Han Dynasty,” in *Defining Chu: Image and Reality in Ancient China*, ed. Constance E. Cook and John Major (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), 145–65. ¹⁹

Frank W. Walbank, *Polybius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 3. ²⁰

On the history of the Achaean League, see Frank W. Wallbank, *Aratos of Sycion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933); and Robert M. Errington, *Philopoemen* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969). ²¹

Lycortas, as Military Commander (*hipparchos*), was selected as a member of the Achaean embassies to Rome and Alexandria in 188 BCE. In the subsequent decades, Lycortas was many times the head of the Achean League as *stratēgos*. See Craige B. Champion, *Cultural Politics in Polybius’s ‘Histories’* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 16–17. ²²

On Polybius in Rome, see Andrew Erskine, “Polybius among the Romans: Life in the Cyclops’ Cave,” in *Imperialism, Cultural Politics & Polybius*, ed. Christopher Smith and Liv Mariah Yarrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17–32. ²³

For an overview of Polybius’s life, see Walbank, *Polybius*, 6–13; and Champion, *Cultural Politics*, 15–18. ²⁴

Walbank, *Polybius*, 7–8. On the issue of the “annexation” of Greece by Rome after the sack of Corinth, see Robert Kallet Marx, *Hegemony to Empire: The Development of the Roman Imperium in the East from 148 to 62 B.C.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 42–57. ²⁵

Pausanias, the Greek geographer of the second century CE, could report of monuments celebrating Polybius’s activity as mediator between Greece and Rome scattered throughout the Hellenic world. See Champion, *Cultural Politics*, 18. ²⁶

Of the forty books of the *Histories*, only the first five survive in a complete form. On the timing of the composition and publication of the *Histories*, see Walbank, *Polybius*, 13–31. On the different phases of Polybius’s appraisal of Rome’s military conquests and “imperialism,” see Walbank, *Polybius*, 157–83. According to Walbank, Polybius’s attitude towards Rome becomes less immediately intelligible in the narration of the events following the battle of Pydna in 168, as he has to account for the efforts of the Achaeans to maintain their independence and for Rome’s shrewd treatment of the vanquished. On this topic, see Domenico Musti, *Polibio e l’imperialismo romano* (Napoli: Liguori, 1978), 69–148. ²⁷

See Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, *Polybe ou la Grèce conquise par les Romains* (PhD diss., Faculté des Lettres de Paris, 1858), 1. For the encounter of Rome and Greece, see Erich S. Gruen, *The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). ¹⁴

On the issue of Polybius's readership, I follow Champion's argument, summarized in *Cultural Politics*, 4. F. W. Walbank instead considers Polybius's intended public to have been mainly Greek, as he states in Polybius, 3–6, 16–19. See also Josephine Crawley Quinn, "Imagining the Imperial Mediterranean," in *Polybius & His World*, 337–52. ¹⁵

On the meanings of *πραγματική ἀστορία* in Polybius and on his historiographical approach, see Walbank, *Polybius*, 66–96; see also Paul Pédech, *Le méthode historique de Polybe* (Paris: Université de Paris, 1964), 331–54. ¹⁶

On Polybius's relationship with the Hellenic historiographical and rhetorical traditions, see Walbank, *Polybius*, 32–65; Riccardo Vattuone, "Timeo, Polibio e la storiografia greca d'occidente," in *The Shadow of Polybius: Intertextuality as a Research Tool in Greek Historiography*, ed. Guido Schepens and Jan Bollansée (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 73–88; Mario Attilio Levi, "La critica di Polibio a Timeo," *Studi Alessandrini* 196 (1963): 195–202. ¹⁷

Pédech (in *Le méthode historique de Polybe*, 331–54) singles out the following causal factors in the Hellenic historiography and in Polybius: influence of individuals, the character of political institutions and military expertise, geography, and fortune. Polybius (*Hist.* III, 5–7), in the analysis of the origin of war, famously expounds his theory based on the distinction among origins (*ἀρχαί*), causes (*αἰτίαι*), and alleged motives (*πρόφασις*). ¹⁸

This is the theme of book VI of the *Histories*. See Andrew Erskine, "How to Rule the World: Polybius Book 6 Reconsidered," in *Polybius & His World*, 231–46. See also Clifford Ando, "Was Classical Rome a *Polis*," *Classical Antiquity* 18 (1999): 13. ¹⁹

See Champion on Book 6, 66–99; Jules Nicolet, "Polybe et les institutions romaines," *Entretiens sur l'Antiquité Classique* de la Fondation Hardt (Genève: Vandoeuvres, 1974), 209–65. ²⁰

Champion (in *Cultural Politics*, 30–31) defines the use of the concept of "Hellenism" in Polybius and among contemporary Greek intellectuals as a cultural strategy devised to counter Rome's power. On the development of a pan-Hellenic identity and on its different (instrumental) formulations in different historical contexts, see Champion, *Cultural Politics*, 31–40; see also C. P. Jones, "ἐθνος and γένος in Herodotus," *Classical Quarterly* 46 (1996): 315–20. ²¹

Champion, *Cultural Politics*, 4. ²²

Arnaldo Momigliano has pointed out that although Polybius was the only Greek historian to resort to the notion of cycles, he only did so with regard to the evolution of constitutions, for he did not include ordinary military and political events in this

vision. See Momigliano, “Persian, Greek, and Jewish Historiography,” in *The Classical Foundation of Modern Historiography*, 18. ¹⁸

Hist. I, 2–3. ¹⁹

Polybius acknowledges the work of Ephorus of Cumae as the first to attempt a general history; see *Hist.* V, 33, 2. ²⁰

Julia Ching and Willard G. Oxtoby, *Moral Enlightenment: Leibniz and Wolff on China* (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, Nettetal, Steyler, 1992); Basil Guy, *The French Image of China before and after Voltaire* (Geneve: Institut et Musee Voltaire, 1963); François Quesnay, “*Historie Sommarie de Confucius*,” in *Le despotisme de la Chine*, Eleutherian Mills Historical Library, Winterthur Manuscript, group 2, series E, (Berlin, 1972), 60–72. ²¹

See Iggers and Wang, *A Global History*, 48. ²²

See Sabbatucci, *La prospettiva*, 200–34. For an original and compelling philosophical disambiguation of the concept of Heaven, see David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, “*Tian and Dao as Nontranscendent Fields*,” in *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998). Stephen F. Teiser, “*The Spirits of Chinese Religions*,” in *Religions of China in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3–37; David L. Overmyer, David N. Keightley, Edward L. Shaughnessy, Constance A. Cook, and Donald Harper, “*Chinese Religions—The State of the Field, Part I: Early Religious Traditions: The Neolithic Period Through the Han Dynasty* (ca. 4000 B.C.E. to 220 C.E.),” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54(1) (February 1995): 124–60. ²³

See Lillian Lan-ying Tseng’s *Picturing Heaven in Early China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011). ²⁴

In Mencius (ca. 372–289 BCE), the role of Heaven is also connected to the moral nature (*xing* 性 of men; see Robert Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven: Philosophy and the Defense of Ritual Mastery* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 99–130. Tianming has been traditionally translated as “Mandate of Heaven.” David Schaberg argued that “Heaven’s Command” is more appropriate; see David Schaberg, “*Command and the Content of Tradition*,” in *The Magnitude of Ming*, ed. Christopher Lupke (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 23–26. ²⁵

The origins of the term tian are obscure and it is still very difficult to ascertain to what extent it was an original Zhou creation or was instead already a Shang deity. For a summary of the influential theories about tian’s origins and meanings by Herrlee G. Creel (who considered Tian the collectivity of the rulers of the past living in Heaven) and Shima Kunio (who interpreted tian as the sky, a sky-god, or the altar of that god), see Robert Eno’s “*Appendix A*,” in *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, 181–86. See also Herrlee G. Creel, *The Origins of Statecraft in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), vol. 1: 497–504; and Shima Kunio, *Inkyo bokuji kenkyū* (Hirosaki: Chūgokugaku Kenkyūkai, 1958), 174–86. Eno (*The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, 186–89), on the basis of his philological analysis, sees tian also as the destination of the

ashes of the sacrificial victims. Sarah Allan through a re-examination of the debates presented above, has recently interpreted tian as both a natural phenomenon and in connection with dynastic ancestors; see Sarah Allan, "T'ien and Shang Ti in Pre-Han China," *Acta Asiatica* 98 (2010): 1–18. On the connection between Heaven and sacrifice, see Sarah Allan, "Drought, Human Sacrifice and the Mandate of Heaven in a Lost Text from the Shangshu," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 47(3) (1984): 523–39; Michael Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 205–10. ¹⁴

On Shang ancestral cults, see Robert Eno, "Was There a High God Ti in Shang Religion?" *Early China* 15 (1990): 1–26; "Deities and Ancestors in Early Oracle Inscriptions," in *Religions of China in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 41–51. ¹⁵

Translation in Arthur Wailey, *The Book of Songs/Shijing* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 228 (Wen Wang 文王 Mao 毛235). ¹⁶

"The Book of the feng and shan Sacrifices," in the Records, chronicles the history of imperial legitimization in China from its origins to Emperor Wu; see SJ 28. ¹⁷

On Emperor Wu's struggle with court classicists, see Itano Chôhachi, *Chûgoku kodai ni okeru ningenkan no tenkai* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, Shôwa, 1972). ¹⁸

See Michael Loewe, "K'uang Heng and the Reform of Religious Practices (31 B.C.)" *Asia Major* 17(1), part 2 (1988): 1–27; Watanabe Yoshihiro, "Sacrifices to Heaven in the Han and the Theory of Six Heavens," *Acta Asiatica* 98 (2010): 43–75. ¹⁹

It can be argued that the authors tended to treat remote events whose knowledge derived from archival materials more respectfully, whereas they were more critical or ironic in recounting facts about which they had a more direct knowledge. ²⁰

The assumption that Emperor Wu's ceremonies were addressed univocally to Heaven is based on later historiography such as the "Jiaosi zhi" 郊祀志(*Hanshu*, 25). For a complete translation and study of the "Jiaosi zhi," see Marianne Bujard, *Le sacrifice au Ciel dans la Chine ancienne: Théorie et pratique sous les Han occidentaux* (Paris: Ecole française d'Extreme-Orient, 2000). ²¹

SJ 49, 1968. Cf. Confucius, *Lun Yu*, *Weiling Gong*, 29. ²²

See Nancy Lee Swann, *Pan Chao, Foremost Woman Scholar of China, First Century A.D.* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968). ²³

SJ 49, 1968. ²⁴

As a regent Lü issued ordinances (zhi 制 stamped with her own seal, which was fashioned in jade and engraved with terms exclusively associated with the emperor; see Qin Bo, "Xi-Han huanghou yüxi he Ganlu ernian tongfanlou de faxian," *Wenwu* 5 (1973): 26–29. ²⁵

SJ 9, 412. "Internal evidence" about the fact that Sima Qian considered Lü's rule legitimate might be elicited from the very structure and "numerology" of the *Shiji*. As noted by Mark Edward Lewis, the number twelve in the benji might symbolize cosmic completion; see M. E. Lewis, "The Feng and Shan Sacrifices of the Emperor Wu of the

Han," in *State and Court Ritual in China*, ed. J. P. Mc Dermott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 20–50. According to some scholars, criticism toward Lü's reign was expressed through a conspicuous increase in the registration of astrological phenomena. Whether such indirect attacks came from the historians or from the officers has been the object of a heated debate between Hans Bielenstein and Wolfram Eberhard; see Hans Bielenstein, "An Interpretation of the Portents in the Ts'ien Han Shu," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 22 (1950): 127–43; "Han Portents and Prognostications," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 57 (1984): 97–112; and Wolfram Eberhard, "The Political Function of Astronomy and Astronomers in Han China" *Chinese Thought & Institution*, ed. J. F. Fairbank (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 33–71. ¹⁴

SJ 8, 348. ¹⁴

SJ 8, 348. On cloud divination, see Michael Loewe, "The Oracles of the Clouds and of the Winds," in M. Loewe, *Divination, Mythology, and Monarchy in Han China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 191–213. ¹⁴

SJ 8, 391. On Xiao He, see Michael Loewe, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Qin, Former Han & Xin Periods* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 603–05. ¹⁴

SJ 8, 343. ¹⁴

SJ 48, 1949. ¹⁴

SJ 48, 1950. ¹⁴

Ibid. ¹⁴

Ibid. ¹⁴

Ibid. ¹⁴

Ibid. ¹⁴

Ibid. ¹⁴

SJ 8, 347. ¹⁴

SJ 8, 344. On the contrary, Liu's aristocratic rival Xiang Yu, when a boy, upon seeing Qin Shihuangdi for the first time, expressed the desire to depose and replace him; see SJ 7, 296. ¹⁴

On the symbolism of colors and on their association with the Han, see Michael Loewe, "Water Earth, and Fire: The Symbols of the Han Dynasty," in *Divination*, 57–60. ¹⁴

SJ 8, 347. ¹⁴

SJ 7, 322. ¹⁴

SJ 97, 2699. My translation is based on B. Watson, *Records of the Grand Historian*, 1: 226–27. ¹⁴

SJ 8, 381. ¹⁴

SJ 16, 760. ¹⁴

SJ 97, 2694. ¹⁴

See J. J. Pollitt, *Art in the Hellenistic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 2–9. ¹⁴

See Emma Stafford, "Personification in Greek Religious Thought and Practice," in *A Companion to Greek Religion*, ed. Daniel Ogden (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 71–86; Liz James, "Good Luck and Good Fortune to the Queen Cities: Empresses and Tyches in Byzantium," in *Personification in the Greek World: From Antiquity to Byzantium*, ed. Emma Stafford and Judith Herrin (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 293–305; Ernst H. Gombrich, "Personification," in *Classical Influences on European Culture AD 500–1500*, ed. R. R. Bolgar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 247–57. ¹⁴

Tyche would be idiomatically associated with Alexander the Great and his incredible successes by Plutarch (46–120 CE) in the oration "On the Fortune or the Virtue of Alexander." See Plutarch, *Moralia* (Oxford: Loeb Classical Library, 1936), vol. 4: 319–77. ¹⁵

Nicole Balaïche, "Tychè et la Tychè dans les cités de la Palestine romaine," *Syria* 80 (2003): 111–38. ¹⁶

See Jacqueline Champeaux, *Fortuna: recherches sur le culte de la Fortune à Rome et dans le monde romain des origines à la mort de César* (Roma: Collection de l'Ecole française de Rome, 1982); Ferdinando Castagnoli, "Il culto di Mater Matuta e della Fortuna nel Foro Boario," *Studi Romani* 27(2) (1979): 145–52. ¹⁷

Livy I, 39, 1: While a child named Servius Tullius lay sleeping, his head burst into flames in the sight of many (see also Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 4.14, 3–4). On Augustan reforms and their connection to the Servian tradition, see Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: Volume I, a History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 184. ¹⁸

Livy I. 39–41 (I, 41,3; "qui sis, non unde natus sis": Consider what you are, not whence you were born). ¹⁹

As for the rhetoric construction of Etruscan women as a foil to the modesty of Roman matrons, see Larissa Bonfante, *Etruscan Life and After Life: A Handbook of Etruscan Studies* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 232–33. ²⁰

Plutarch, "On the Fortune of the Romans," *Moralia*, 383. ²¹

Hist. I, 4, 1–2. Frank W. Walbank, *Polybius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); *Polybius, Rome and the Hellenistic World: Essays and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). On Tyche in Polybius, see Frank. W. Walbank, *Historical Commentary on Polybius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), vol. 1: 16–26; Paul Pédech, *Le méthode historique de Polybe* (Paris: Université de Paris, 1964), 331–54. Also see Musti, *Polibio e l'imperialismo romano*; and Champion, *Cultural Politics*. ²²

On Polybius's relationship with past historiography, see Walbank, *Polybius*, 32–65. ²³

¹⁴ The starting point of Polybius's narration is the 140th Olympiad in 220 BCE. These are, in the author's opinion, the fundamental events: "In Greece, what is called the Social war: the first waged by Philip, son of Demetrius and father of Perseus, in league with the Achaeans against the Aetolians, in Asia, the war for the possession of Coele-

Syria which Antiochus and Ptolemy Philopator carried on against each other. In Italy, Libya, and their neighborhood, the conflict between Rome and Carthage, generally called the Hannibalian war. My work thus begins where that of Aratus of Sicyon leaves off." See Hist. I, 3. ¹⁴

Momigliano, The Classical Foundations, 44–53. ¹⁴

Momigliano refers in particular to Hermann Ulrici, Charakteristik der antiken Historiographie (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1833). ¹⁴

For this reconstruction, see, Frank. W. Walbank, "Supernatural Paraphernalia," in Walbank, Polybius, Rome and the Hellenistic World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 250–51. ¹⁴

Hist. XV, 20, 1–4. ¹⁴

In this passage, the word choice tells us that for Polybius, Tyche could represent a hostile force, in this case almost as capricious as the gods of the Homeric tradition; see Hist. I, 1,2. literally, "to bear the changes of Fortune with a noble composure," "τὰς τῆς τύχης μεταβολὰς γενναίως ὑποφέρειν." ¹⁴

Walbank, Commentary on Polybius, 16–17. ¹⁴

Ibid., 17. ¹⁴

For Walbank's critique of Polybius's concept of causality, see *ibid.*, 1:17; and also Walbank, "Supernatural Paraphernalia," 245–57. On Polybius and causality, also see Peter S. Derow, "Historical Explanation: Polybius and his Predecessors," in Greek Historiography, ed. S. Hornblower (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 73–90; P. S. Derow, "Polybius, Rome and the East," *Journal of Roman Studies* 69 (1979): 1–15. ¹⁴

Hist. XXXVI, 17: τῶν πολλῶν δόξαις. ¹⁴

Hist. II 20. ¹⁴

Hist. VI, 56. ¹⁴

See "Libro Primo" (Book One): XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV, in *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, (Torino: UTET, 1999), 507–17. ¹⁴

From the Eastern Han the institutionalized interpretation of omens as fundamental elements of the official doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven will be extremely important for promotions of officials. ¹⁴